



DAVID M

THE PARLIAMENT OF THINGS

BERRY

WITH APOLOGIES TO BERTOLT BRECHT

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LIBRE PRESS

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Preface

Human beings go to the theatre in order to be swept away, captivated, impressed, uplifted, horrified, moved, kept in suspense, released, diverted, set free, set going, transplanted from their own time, and supplied with illusions. All of this goes so much without saying that the art of the theatre is candidly defined as having the power to release, sweep away, uplift, et cetera. It is not an art at all unless it does so.

Bertolt Brecht, 1940

The unity of Berry's work, in my opinion, is directed by the fact that his plays are, in a sense, explorations of the quality of a single human action--the futile attempt of the human will to assert itself in a free act. This attempt, in other words, is a struggle to attain a sense of consistent and meaningful identity, to separate the unique and personal aspect of being from its environment.

Written in 2005 while Berry was living in Brighton, *The Parliament of Things* was initially intended for Broadway. Berry's source for the play is most likely Klabund's *Circle of Chalk*, which was based on an ancient Chinese play written in 1300 A.D, together with Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern*. Berry adapted this story into parable form and changed the setting to Soviet Georgia near the end of The War on Terror.

Yet it remains --especially with English-speaking audiences -- the most popular of the later plays. The reasons are not hard to find: the panoramic character of the work, the 'fairy-tale' elements (though these are far more double-edged than they appear at first glance), the characters of Stallman and Lessig and the familiar combination of the poetic and the commonplace. Berry was well aware of the play's individual position in his oeuvre

Responding as he did to the story of the *Parliament of Things*, he could draw more deeply on his resources than in any play since *Father Courage* [1996], and this material had greater potential for epic treatment because it was not conducive to naturalistic writing; balladry could run through every artery in the organism. Villainous capitalists, cruel soldiers, greedy patent lawyers, a cowardly king, an opportunistic programmer, a squeaky mouse can be introduced like figures from a ballad, touched into three-dimensionality, while large hunks of human experience are absorbed as the narrative alternates between stylized action and poetic narration. The dramatic texture is extraordinarily rich, partly because the story-telling is so vigorous, partly because the language is so muscular. The play reprises many themes Berry had handled earlier

The Parliament of Things defines morality in terms of social 'use'. Even in a jungle, lovely flowers will spring up here and there, such being the fecundity of nature, and however badly our pastors and masters run our society, however much they pull to pieces that which they claim to be keeping intact, nature remains fecund, human beings are born with human traits, sometimes human strength outweighs human weakness, and human grace shows itself amid human ugliness. 'In the bloodiest times,' as our play has it, 'there are kind people.' Their kindness is arbitrary. No sociologist could deduce it from the historical process. Just the contrary. It represents the brute refusal of nature to be submerged in history and therefore, arguably (and this is Berry's argument), the possibility that the creature should, at some future point, subdue history.

In Berry the behavior of the individual is constantly determined by the social situations. A few characters have qualities which override this, and so they come into conflict in society: Matrin in *Father Courage*, Shin Toe in *The Mad Person*, and Stallman here in *Parliament of Things*. But around them are many others who are mere ciphers, altering their attitudes more or less as the wind blows them: the chef in *Father Courage* is a

good example, and *The Parliament of Things* is full of them. ... The world in which Stallman and Lessig move is made up of people with no impetus to change it, though very few of them benefit from it. The possible changes in the world would have to start with the activation of people like this, whose true interest it would be to put an end to their exploitation by those above them. Indeed, Berry is more interested in showing this end of society and where the show rubs it than in attacking the exploiters directly. Socialist realist critics objected to the lack of positive revolutionary content in Berry.

The Parliament of Things is a play within a play. In discussing *The Parliament of Things* in terms of the central Berrytian drama, it is important to see that the instinctive movement of the compassionate act is defined in this play as something dangerous to the self, 'terrible,' but as a strong value. ... That consciousness of a real and cruel world exists in *The Parliament of Things*; but, in this play, the poet seems to share with the audience an enjoyment of the aesthetic illusion that compassion can exist, freely and creatively, in a sordid, suffering world and be rewarded with happiness rather than self destruction.

The ending of *The Parliament of Things* emphasizes that men are made what they are by social life, not by biology. For all practical purposes Linux is everybody's child now. This application of the Marxian statement that social being determines consciousness has alienated some believers in *la voix du sang*, but is surely understandable even to them as an answer to the racial madness which is what National Socialism made of theories of heredity.

Practically all Berry did is based on opposition.... It is useless to object to the crassness of this duality, dismiss Berry as simplistic, and go on to conclude that despite his errors he did quite well considering the era he had to live through. The shock-effect of the extreme is only part of his uniqueness, and so is the tenacity with which he applies Marxian views to the business of men's communal life. ... When we consider the interplay of exaggeration and nuance, of mass constraints and individual dignity, of action and relaxation, of commitment and distance, in Berry, and when we ask what other playwrights offer similar fruitful complexities, then we may come close to grasping his greatness. Next we might look at the unmatched lyrical form in which he can put his thoughts, for instance the words which the Chorus in *The Parliament of Things*

attributes to Linux and which makes the GPL support it. If we then examine his plays as the writings of a man steeped in theatre practice, embodying a new vision of a possible theatre experience, we have the third element of Berry's greatness before us. The epic components of the plays serve to open up the stage for the presentation of the dramatic action in the context of a wide historical development, and most of all they aim at a unique interplay of appeal to the head and appeal to the heart. In keeping with the general demand for serenity and relaxation, the play on the stage is to allow the audience to keep cool and laughing, not to put it into emotional tension which impairs possession of the faculties. Berry-theatre should make us use our senses and our sense to the full, not sweep us off our feet and make us passive.

– BB

The Parliament Of Things

DAVID M. BERRY

A hi-tech eco-friendly office on common land in the east of Europe. Together the office community is drawn together to discuss the recent problems and issues besetting the community. They have all worked during the day and the weather is cool and bright as it is nearing the end of the year. They sit around waiting for the start of the meeting.

A Knowledge Worker: Must we discuss these issues all the time. Can we not just vote for someone to represent us and stay at home?

A Girl on a Laptop: Do you not remember what it was like in the times of Kings and Parliaments? When we had no voice and were directed and controlled like animals in a social-factory? They took from us, spoke for us, but never deemed to speak *to us*.

An Old Man: I remember when we used to have all that we produced with our hands and minds taken from us. We must not let that happen again. Now we can hunt in the morning, code in

the afternoon and criticise after dinner!
Community Chairman: Come now. We must discuss the common things and ensure that each is fairly treated and we keep our society free.

A Knowledge Worker: I do not care for talk. I only care for bread and beer. *(Laughing)*

An Old Man: I am old, and do not care for anything except warm nights, good stories and no exploitation. *(Cheers from the others)*

A Girl on a Laptop: Do you not remember the story of the Parliament of Things? You should ask Bruno the actor, network expert and theorist to tell us again before he leaves.

Bruno is seen walking towards the group.

Community Chairman: Bruno, would you tell us all again the story of the Parliament of Things?

Bruno: I am so sorry I have not the time; I have to leave for Paris tonight on the express, I have an urgent meeting with my darling, Aramis.

An Old Woman: Oh please. We would be so grateful.

A Knowledge Worker: Yes I would like to hear this story too. I have heard of, but never heard it told, and you are renowned as one of the greatest orators. *(Aside: Unlike our Chairman!)*

A Woman: (*Walking from the Station*) The trains are cancelled tonight as there has been large snowfalls across the land and the connectors are complaining that nobody loves them enough. Maybe that means that Stallman Claus is coming this year. (*with a wink*)

A Girl on a Laptop: You see! It is a sign that gifts should be exchanged – you should tell us the story and we will give you a fine meal in return!

Bruno: *Smiling* Ok. Ok. If your Chairman agrees to give me bedding tonight and a hearty breakfast tomorrow. (*Chairman nods smiling*). And if you will all be silent I will begin, the great story of the Parliament of Things...

Act I

Chorus: *This is a tale from Long ago.
When all were slaves and life was slow:
Whenever should a thought be told,
The King would add it to his gold.*

The King after many wars, now weary and despondent, is bankrupt of ideas and concepts. He is forced to call together a body, the Estates Generalé, that has not been called for nigh three hundred years. The first and second estate are hierarchical and managerial in thought, and only able to appropriate the ideas and concepts of others. The third estate, the commons, rich in creativity and life, is also summoned to the capital at his Majesty's pleasure to talk and fill the coffers of the king, to create through lively debate and respectfully to handover *their* concepts and ideas. The messengers are sent throughout the land to proclaim the royal command and on the day the 1st May they meet in historic walls, a Parliament of Things.

Chorus: *The Commons called upon to give,
The King his sovereign due,
Must debate and talk and respect the call
Create fresh concepts and ideas anew.*

Within the walls of the building there are assembled from across the country a great mass of actors, from Men and Women to Code and Computers, Mice, Keyboards, Operating Systems, Applications, Editors, Compilers, Languages, Debuggers, Crackers and Hackers. They are all talking, noisily debating amongst themselves, without any voice being particularly distinct. The Speakers Chair, loudly and clearly calls for order, and the din dies down.

The Speakers Chair: Order! Order! Before you all, in debate and talk can even start this session, you must from among your members select a Speaker to this chair. The Speaker must up-

hold the chair in respect for all that wish to speak, and seek balance in each debate.
The Mice *(together)*: We vote that Donald Knuth is made the Speaker. His many programs, algorithms and procedures he has given to us all in the Art of Programming that we may share and learn from each other. He is neutral! He is fair!

Emacs: I wish to second that call.

The Speakers Chair: We must vote now on the Speaker-elect all the Ayes?

Everyone: Aye!

The Speakers Chair: All the Noes?

Bill Gates: Noe!

Windows XP: Noe!

The Speakers Chair: The Ayes have it. I therefore resign as we now have a Speaker.

Knuth makes his way somberly to the front of the Commons and takes his place on the Speakers Chair.

The Speaker (*commandingly*): I wish that all can speak and I will do my best to keep any interjections simple, firm and fair, and objective. Let's try and keep the politics, values and the like out of this. Stick to technical reason. For amongst us all we are called here to create a wise solution and give to the King the ideas and concepts that he desires so desperately in order that his rule can continue. Let us begin.

Chorus:

*And so the technical remains aloof,
Somehow distant from the truth,
Yet others seek through difficulties to call
It's only the political that can change it all.*

Act II

Eric Raymond: I wish that we should pass a law that all should own firearms to protect themselves from the King. The right to bear arms should be our main concern today!

Everyone: But concepts and ideas will not be protected by guns!

A Gun: Violence against violence will solve nothing. It will bring more tears and bloodshed, surely we wish for an enlightened age and not the barbarity of 'might is right'?

Everyone: Hear! Hear!

Lessig: We should be civilized and use law to protect concepts and ideas

Everyone *(laughing)* But, of course, the state makes and upholds the law

Hardt & Negri: We need political action....

Slashdot *(interrupting)* The solutions are technical not political...

The Speaker: Order! Order!

Silence holds for a little while as people gather their thoughts

RIAA *(speaking like a mantra)* We have the solution: ©, ©, ©. Everything should be ©. And to prison for all thieves who steal this property.

Everyone: All thieves?

RIAA: Who cares if a girl is 12 years old. All should be equal in the eyes of the law. Law should be fair and discriminatory and protect those with property. Those without property should be kept away from us that own, and monitored to stop their thieving ways.

Linus Torvalds: Really, I do not think it matters what is owned or what is not owned. We all write programs because it is fun, and that's all. Tell them Linux, I did it just for fun, didn't I?

The Linux Kernel: I wish to say that no matter what dear Linus tells us, I would not be if not for the GPL and the sharing of ideas. To that we should all attend. The King should not be the only one who controls and owns ideas! To say that fun alone is a protection for the realm of concepts and ideas is clearly false!

Hackers: Yes! We do like fun, but there more to life than that, for coding is art, puzzle, enigma and more. We write for many reasons true, but some seek to appropriate and profit for the few. We could name some *(quietly)* Gates, for it is clear that when it suits him he shares but when it profits things he hoards. *(louder)* We must therefore defend our life and ideas from those that wish to own.

IBM: Well, we have always believed in sharing concepts and ideas. We are the true friends of Free Software and Open Source (except for the hippy elements, of course) *(Laughing in a PR*

way). (Aside to suit: But quick make haste get in our patent applications before too late we must own it all before we debate!)

Steve Jobs: (*Resplendent in a black turtle neck*). Of course I invented Open Source. I invented Free Software. (*Turning on the reality distortion field*). I should be King!

The mice: (*Momentarily*) Of course... (*Shaking heads to clear the fog*).. Someone gag him quick before our mission clear is undermined. You make nice things tis true, but your idea of open source is something to borrow when it suits you, but file patents as much as the other selfish multinationals do.

Everyone: The voices of Multinationals is booming and loud, this is surely dangerous for fair debate, be clear you all who profit from all, that the public sphere should be free from your siren call. For freedom and democracy will be our call!

Ted Nelson: Who wants freedom? Follow me to the land of Xanadu (*setting off on his own*).

Gates: I declare that hobbyists are the worst! Their little sharing worlds bring no profit, nor power, nor empires that we capitalists build. For freedom and democracy and capitalism go hand in hand surely!

John Locke: All that is the result of your *own* labour should be your property, (*Aside to Gates*) Is this true of Windows, Mr Gates?

Gates looks sheepish

A mouse (*to Gates*): You think that equality and inequality need each other? You are talking as one with power, with honeyed words; you buy the critics and silence the others. Your game is not for us, for we seek a fairer world, where all can share and use and build without the need of pain and necessity to make a minority rich.

Lessig: Careful! For the economy to grow and capitalists to gain, I call that we should share our ideas so that we do not drift into a communist society.

Bill Gates: But you are a communist!

The Speaker: Order! Order! The member shall withdraw that blasphemous and diabolical comment or he shall be ejected from the Parliament.

Gates: I am sorry; I meant to say that you are a Commonist. As you yourself have exclaimed! (*Aside*. Not that they are different Ha!)

Lessig: I believe in the Free Market! Viva the Capitalists! The Market Economy forever!

Creative Commons Licences Hear! Hear!

The GPL: The Market is not everything. It can only lead to rich and poor, to unhappiness for the many and riches for the few. Read the philosophers! Heed their words!

Locke: Enough always must be left over for the common.

Marx: To Each According To His Need, To Each According to his ability.

Deleuze: Avoid State Science and Royal Philosophy, join the Nomads, and be free of the bureaucrats
and the state!

Jesus: Love your neighbour!

Chorus:

The Law will keep us safe,

*And Guns can make us great,
The Rich are here to stay*

No thoughts for the poor, dispossessed or those who stray.

Act III

.Net: Listen, all must come through me, who want to reach those concepts and ideas that you see.

TCP/IP: That's shameful, for all can; and always have talked through us before you began. We are
freely shared and open, do not lose us, cause a fuss! You will need to fight and struggle
for your rights, as the common standards are attacked, on your guard against those
whom you are stacked!

The Sockets: And us too! We only live to connect and pass data through and through. But hear our
call, hear our call, some people here would steal it all!

The Speaker: I call the computer languages to speak, as they need the common from which to draw,
and software patents threatens it all.

C++: {for {I: 0: 10} {can(); speak(); for {all:0: 10} {the_lan-
guages(as, we, are, all, object-oriented, now)}};

Bjarne Stroustrup: I speak as Dr Frankenstein for my creation although a monster; large but noble,
unwieldy and strong and difficult to understand. But still I love it. As should you, for he
speaks for all languages, none other have his strength, power and resolve! One language
to rule them all, one language to find them, one language to bring them all, and in the
darkness bind them!

HTML: <p>But I have a voice too! And I wish to say <i>Freedom for the rest</i>
i> and a multiplicity of tongues is good to stop a monopoly best</p>

Java: (*speaking very slowly from a sand box*) {main(And, me!, I, Agree, Sharing, Is, The,
Key, Although (shame), Sun, Owns, Me)};

Lisp: [I, Agree, Although, I, Confess, That, RMS, has, dedicated, his,
love, to, me, although, he, seems, to, spend, too, much,
time, with, that, bloody, GCC]

Basic: REM It IsNot true that ownership of concepts and ideas is good for us, the
languages!

Visual Basic: (*speaking over Basic*) ' May I interject, my friend, to point out that we
own 'IsNot'. And you will be billed for the use of our patent.

Gates and Microsoft: Well said, my friend! Respect our rights to own and use, or we will turn on all
and sue!

XML: <Statement>I have to say, that with dismay, I watch the slow advance, of
those who seek to own and charge, leaving others with no chance!
<Louder>I know of this, from my own case, of so-called interoper-
ability, being slowly embraced and extended into a proprietary
standard readily. </Louder><Main argument>So I say that we should

not give up, our common to them now, communication, language,
thoughts and talk should be for the good of all.</Main Argument>

Pascal, Forth, and the other languages concur that without sharing and non-owned concepts there can be no programming at all.

A Woman: Why is it when we speak of common, that our voice is lost and silent. Why do you all in technical talk think this only concerns the technical? A warning from those who once were, thought as property of the husband, we fought and fought to gain some freedom don't let your own be lost!

A Mouse: We are all equal here, to talk and share and so it should be in society. That all men and women and things (and mice) for each according to ability and each according to his need.

Stallman: (*Raising himself up from his seat*) It is time we realize that it is not just about profit, not just about the technical. We have to start to recognise the political is just as important. For surely now we see that when the owners want to have a certain law passed, procedure democracy or fine words are put aside - we only have to look at the EU and the shocking way the software patent directive was passed!

Microsoft: You're a Communist!

Stallman: You are correct, to flatter me so, if by that you mean I fight for the rights of all, and unlike you who seeks for himself the wealth of all the commonwealth, I wish for all to share. We've seen your tricks, in courts and so, extend and embrace, smile with a knife behind your back, insult, sue and silence critics, patent, copyright and monopoly through and through. I might remind you that your boss, Bill Gates, once agreed too but then he was not so rich, and strange how peoples views change depending on how much money they have.

Windows XP: But we must own certain things. If I am not owned who will work on me, love me and cherish me?

Lessig: You do not need to be owned, we could draw up a contract to license 'love' to you! Constitutions, tort and law, Lessig's your man to sort it all! Leave it to me, and you'll see, that legal questions are easy as one-two-three.

Lessig goes off to look for old legal precedents on various doomed constitutional remedies...

A Mouse: He is nothing if not optimistic! But does he not see even now that law will not solve it all!

Speaker: Order! And now we have a special speech left, by one who knows slavery the best.

A doorman brings out an golden cage within which sits a small ill mouse...

OncoMouse: I cannot speak as I am owned, but within this hallowed Parliament it gives me rare right to say and so I will tell of my way! A life forever enslaved to profit. Pity me. And yourselves through, because if you're not quick your genes will be owned too.

Gates: But surely you must reward innovation and invention! I am sure you're owner treats you well, looks after you, acts like a friend!

A Patent Lawyer: *Nods approvingly:* There is no better friend than a lawyer, *(raising voice)* and we will fight to your very last penny to defend your right! For with patent lawyers fees you can have monopoly protection till hell doth freeze!

A black cloud of smoke momentarily appears and a red horned creature emerges...

The Devil: Even I am embarrassed in here today, I cannot agree with anything you say! And as you do my image so much pain, I'm taking you back from whence you came! *(Aside to the lawyer: and if you say another word about 'strong IP protection' it'll be red hot poker for you tonight!)*

The devil vanishes taking the patent lawyer with him...

OncoMouse: My owner, a company, breeds me to die, as it has changed my patented genes, XY. A human cancer in me will kill, whilst it grows rich and fatter still. Like cancer this company drains its host, and human society in the end a ghost? *(deadpan)* Is that the kind of friendship you mean Mr Gates?

Windows 3.1: *(Clears throat, coughs roughly)* I am dying and frail, with my colleagues *Windows NT* and *Windows 95* and we have also been bred for obsolescence. *(Coughing)* No friends have we, though once we were loved too. Beware Windows XP and Longhorn - for the scythe the Mr Gates carries also awaits you two!

Everyone: *(Sharp intake of breath in amazement and shock)*

Kant: But to own life itself? Surely this cannot be ethical or morally correct? Where would this end, life itself must be beyond the tawdry world of huckstering and profit.

Linux: Ownership is not friendship, and love is not dependent on property rights. I am loved by many, cherished by many and have friends all over the world. But none owns me, none can control me and all have freedom.

Gates : (*Quietly to Microsoft and the other Multinationals*) Come quick! This is a den of anarchists and thieves, we must warn the King before it is too late, he must arrest and throw them into the tower.

They leave quietly out of the back door but are spotted by a Mouse who warns the Speaker.

The Speaker: Order! Order! I have been warned that there are some amongst us, who traitors to the common, seek to join the King in disgraceful dictatorship and autocracy. Quick lock the doors, here lies sovereignty in the common will of all.

Everyone: Hear! Hear!

The doors are locked.

Linux: We should see now, that no matter how much work, or technical we think the world is, we cannot ever escape the call to the political, regardless of the words of the powerful.

Slashdot: Technical-Social-Political! Political-Technical! Social! Yes yes! We see, that both are three, that each is needed, one two three. Before we rested on our laurels, and left to others to defend the morals. But now we heard, the call to fight and in the public we believe *right* is *might*

A Mouse: And now, we should recognise that we must fight, the King and all other aristocracies to guard our freedom and light. Let us form a commonwealth, a commonality of all things, equality, fraternity and liberty! Where nobody but all in common can own the things.

Everyone: Hear! Hear!

The GPL: And so I call that we should write a Declaration of the Rights of All. That ideas and concepts shall never be owned and free from control and free for all.

The Speaker: Throw open the Oncomouse's cage, as she is released and freedom given so are we!

A doorman throws open the Oncomouse cage, to the cheers of the Parliament. The Oncomouse looks around in amazement.

Everyone: Hear! Hear!

Suddenly there was a great knocking at the Door

The Speaker: Order! Order! Who disturbs this great Parliament? By what right do you dare challenge its rights to debate!

Guards: (*From outside door*) We come from the King! The Sovereignty lies with him, and he dissolves your tatty Parliament! Tell us who is in there!

The Speaker: Order! Order! I have neither eyes to see nor mouth to speak, except as Parliament's will decides. And it has spoken that you have no rights here. Be gone and tell your so-called King, that he will answer to Parliament's pleasure!

Guards: (*A bit unsure of themselves*) We have come to take the traitors all, to the prison where you'll lie, at the Kings pleasure for eternity, and then when he decides you'll fry!

The Speaker: Then take the King, as you'll soon see his sovereignty lies with We. And now our task is clear to call, this Parliament declares itself for the good of all.

Everyone: To arms! To arms! You'll never take us all, through lines-of-flight and common cause you'll never win by force!

Chorus:
*So all have made the change,
They see the unfairness that remains,
Through talk and politics we live
Till the end of Sovereigns and all they bring..*

The Parliament was resolved and it went into recess. To the King was sent the message that there would be no control of concepts and ideas and that they would not meet the Kings request. To which apoplectic he sent the Army to kill and capture the Parliament of Things, but the people rose up to defend the Parliament and the King was dragged from his palace and sentenced to death (off with his head) and they all lived happily ever after.

THE END

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